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Coping with Video Chat Fatigue During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By
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"It's easier being in each other's presence, or in each other's absence, than in the constant presence of each other's absence."

— Gianpiero Petriglieri, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior

Video chat fatigue is real—the heavy feeling of exhaustion after a day of Zoom or Google Meet-up sessions. These chats are necessary for many of us, but they somehow leave us totally drained. What contributes to this fatigue?

Communication Disconnect — Video chat provides fewer non-verbal cues, so we hyper-focus on the ones there are, namely facial movements. As this data is incomplete, many of us go into overdrive trying to make sense of limited data. Whether or not this extra effort allows us to make sense of the exchange, we end up feeling disoriented and depleted.

Intense Intimacy — Face-to-face video contact creates a pull for heightened intimacy. In regular times, we modulate intimacy with someone by where we look, how we position our bodies, etc. We do not have that opportunity over video chat.

Limited Freedom — Most of us would choose an in-person meeting over a virtual one, but the pandemic forces us to use virtual options we might otherwise resist. In addition to this stress, our options for physical positioning are constrained by the expectation of looking directly at the screen.

Physical Discomfort — Many counselors and teachers report neck pain, back pain, eyestrain, and headaches from hours of focused attention on screens.

Technical Errors — Frozen screens and audio problems are regular challenges even for experienced video chat users.

Performance Anxiety — The pressure of being on camera comes with increased self-consciousness. Whether we are staring at ourselves on the screen or worrying about others assessing our appearance and our surroundings, this added stress takes a toll.

Blurred Boundaries — We talk to our patients and students via video chat, but we also use it with friends and family. We do all this at home, so the boundaries between work, social life, home and office become easily confused.

What Can We Do About It?

Ground Yourself and Your Devices — Before you begin a day's video sessions, take a few minutes to ground yourself in your chair and take a few breaths. Leave time to make sure your devices and connections are in good working order to reduce the chance of technological glitches.

Make a Personal Connection — Allow yourself a few moments to genuinely greet others and share something personal. While intimacy is more difficult to achieve in video chats, it can happen. In groups, it is important to make space for everyone to be heard.

Take breaks — Just because we can doesn't mean we should. Use the telephone when possible. Shut off your camera and rely on the audio feed if that is helpful. Give your brain a chance to switch gears between sessions by standing up and doing something physical if at all possible. Take a short walk, do some jumping jacks, or get a glass of water.

Make Adjustments — Try different video chat settings to add some variety to your day. Turn off self-view so you can only see your client or allow only the speaker to appear in a larger group. Play with settings. Trying to view and interpret the attitudes of all participants in a larger meeting at once can easily lead to overload and confusion.

Create boundaries — Do something concrete to delineate home space from workspace. Employ a divider, or intentionally change the lighting when you are done with clients.

Grant Freedoms — Allow yourself and your clients and colleagues the freedom to look away from the camera from time to time. This can decrease pressure, anxiety, and tension.

Use Humor and Be Patient—For many non-digital natives, video chat seems strange and foreign no matter how many times we do it. Be patient with yourselves and your clients and try to have a good laugh as you sort it out.

Learn From Clients and Students—They live in a world of video chat and it may come more naturally to them.

Be Gentle with Yourself — You are not alone. Others are experiencing the same exhaustion. This is new territory for us all and it will take time to figure out the right balance. Reach out to colleagues to share experiences and get support — maybe just do so over the phone!

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